



Thriving (and not just surviving) in a VUCA healthcare industry

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Abstract

VUCA stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. The healthcare sector is considered a VUCA industry, constantly changing through rampant mergers and acquisitions, rapidly evolving regulations, and leading-edge innovations. So how does one build a career in this VUCA world? I share my career journey and the survival guide that helped me thrive and grow as a regulatory medical writer in the healthcare industry.

The VUCA healthcare industry

We are living in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world.¹ Volatility comes from constant and rapid change. Uncertainty comes with the unpredictable nature of modern life. Complexity is seen in the multiple interconnected confounding issues we are facing each day. And ambiguity is evident in today's

mixed reality – a convergence of physical and virtual worlds.

The healthcare sector, especially, is a VUCA industry, being among the top industries most active in terms of mergers and acquisitions.² It is also one of the most highly regulated, the last 5 years having witnessed drastic regulatory changes, with more stringent requirements. Finally, it is also a hotbed of innovation, from clinicogenomics to surgical robotics, from advanced medicinal therapies to digital biomarkers.

In fact, the industry is witnessing seismic shifts as medicine gets more personalised, health data becomes highly valuable, and data sharing is made obligatory. Add to the mix the geo-political forces that could make the EMA relocate to Amsterdam or push clinical trial conduct towards China, and you have VUCAness probably at its ultimate.

So how does one cope, even thrive in such an environment?

In my 13+ years of experience as a regulatory medical writer, I have changed countries, shifted from an employee to a freelancer, then reverted back to being employed, and lived through four different mergers and acquisitions and six line managers within a single company. I took on challenges, grabbed opportunities, suffered setbacks – and bounced back. And

through this rollercoaster ride, I slowly moved up the career ladder. Yet, never did I imagine that one day I would be leading a small medical writing team globally.

So please allow me to share my career journey (see sketch in Figure 1) and the survival guide that helped me advance my career in this environment.

1. Make it personal (even if it's virtual)

We frequently hear complaints that the virtual world is very impersonal and therefore does not foster team building, that one cannot build good working relationships with colleagues one only “e-meets” online.

I disagree. One can make things “personal” regardless of the physical distance. And distance shouldn't be used as an excuse for not building relationships and bridging gaps. In my previous contract research organisation (CRO) position, I was one of the very first Europeans to work on a US project back in 2012. In doing so, I inadvertently became a member of a global clinical team that met virtually on a

weekly basis. It wasn't easy at the start. Technology was disruptive. Time differences were intrusive. But I then learned to appreciate the flexibility of being able to “meet” regularly without travelling. That virtual team was the big start

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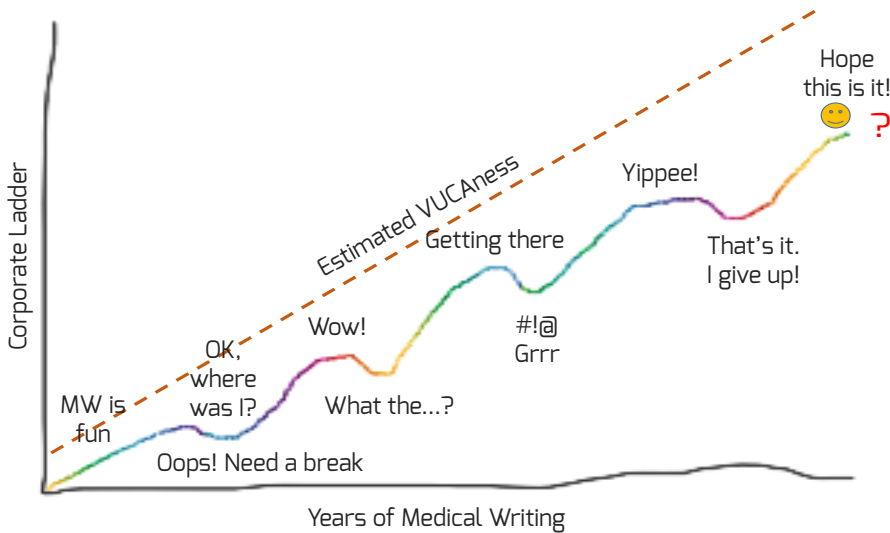


Figure 1. My career journey

The scales and data points are intentionally non-scientific.

for me. Many team members became good friends. I was already there before Webex and Skype became household names. Years later, when I changed companies, my virtual project manager in that team wrote “I will miss you. We may fill the slot but we can’t replace you.” We have never ever met in physical space.

2. Don’t dwell in the past, look forward

Don’t hark about what used to be. Look forward instead. Below are three statements I frequently hear that hold us back.

“The old system was better, faster.” If this were the case, Apple wouldn’t roll out new iPhone models each year to become the first trillion-dollar company. Upgrades and transitions are always a pain at the very beginning. It’s like breaking in a new pair of shoes: you may experience initial discomfort, yes, but it is necessary unless you want to wear the same old pair in all the years to come.

“We’ve always done it this way.” Maybe it’s time to challenge the norm and think outside the box.

“It’s a (regulatory) requirement.” Regulations or guidelines? How many times do I have to remind people that ICH E3 is a guideline, not a straitjacket? And it’s >20 years old.”⁴

3. Foster the growth mindset

Stanford’s Carol Dweck described two distinct mindsets – the fixed mindset and the growth mindset.³ To thrive in a VUCA healthcare world, a growth mindset is needed. New regulations, new products, new paradigms, new technology – the growth mindset does not shy away from or get frustrated with these challenges.

I take the EMA Policy 0070 from my experience book. Following the 2014 EMWA

symposium on public disclosure in Budapest, I had three choices:

1. bury my head in the sand and pretend it’s not going to happen;
2. wait and see, then react, or
3. prepare for something that was inevitable.

I chose the third option and evaluated the risks for ongoing and upcoming projects. I did research, I discussed with colleagues, I strategised. And I spread the word within my company. The initial reaction among my work colleagues was scepticism: “The pharma industry will never allow this to happen.”

But it did happen in October 2016 when EMA Policy 0070 version 1.0 was released. I was ready with a knowledge base, a plan, and an EMWA workshop. Overnight, I became the “disclosure expert” within my company.

4. Integrate, think “we”, not “us” vs. “them”

Post-acquisition or post-merger, we tend to think in terms of “us” vs. “them”. Those coming from a smaller company tend to view the bigger company as the aggressor. The sooner we switch our mindset to “we”, the better. Forget about “legacy” projects. They are all OUR projects now.

Integration is about fitting in, not about giving in and compromising your values. You can integrate and still keep your principles intact. I found out over the years that the cultural divide is not just about geography, language, and ethnicity. Company culture counts a lot more, so if you make

an effort at crossing that divide, you are already halfway there.

Meld personal goals with company goals. Believe in what you are doing and believe in the company you work for. If you don’t, then you are in the wrong place, and an unhappy one at that. Aligning goals means working as a team even if the goalposts sometimes move.

I believe in what I do. My job is not just a source of income. It is part of who I am.

5. Welcome change, roll with the punches

Timelines shift, companies reorganise, products evolve, regulations change, and people come and go. And just when you think you have it figured out, the next big change happens.

Change is scary. But change is also necessary to correct mistakes and improve quality. In all this VUCAness, our jobs are changing around us. If we don’t embrace change and change with our jobs, we will become irrelevant. As Charles Darwin highlighted over 100 years ago, “It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change.”

So be agile and ready to change gears. Roll with the punches, then get up, roll up your sleeves, and get back to work. There are patients out there waiting for new treatments.

As a concrete example, with the new EU Medical Device Regulation (2017/745 MDR), we are witnessing a medical technology industry grappling with increased and rather unclear requirements. Many folks are crying “foul”. At the 2018 EMWA symposium on medical devices, a wise colleague put all these in context with the

statement: “It’s all for patient safety.” Another colleague of many years of experience remarked, “The MDR panic reminds me back when ICH E3 came into existence in the late 1990s. Everybody was worried and apprehensive.” Today, the ICH E3 is so entrenched in the regulatory writer’s psyche that one can’t really imagine a world without it.

We can’t go against the tide of regulatory changes. If we embrace it, we’ll be happier for it.

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Charles Darwin

6. Make technology your friend, make age an advantage

As artificial intelligence advances, we may fear for

our jobs. Will robots be writing our documents in the coming years? Maybe. Maybe not. But for now, I enjoy the free time I gain from using that robot lawn mower or that automated editing software. And in healthcare, like in many fields, I firmly believe that there is a need for human intervention and intelligence that no machine can truly provide.

The technological tools available for medical writers are staggering. We can't have them all, but I have chosen a core set of software I use to perform my work efficiently.

As parent to two teenagers, I am very aware of my limitations in adopting new technology. I have a lot to learn from the millennials. But I, too, have something they lack – the advantage of life and professional experience that age brings. I can use the technical savviness of the millennials in my group to complement my experience. Taken together, we make an awesome team.

7. Have a support group(s)

In the face of all this VUCAness, a support group is invaluable. This can be your family, your friends, or your colleagues. Do not underestimate the impact of a supportive spouse or partner in your life.

A kindred professional community is another great support. EMWA, AMWA, DIA, ISMPP – these are the circles where we share, discuss, learn, brainstorm, and come to grips with change. EMWA was the organisation that helped “make” me professionally, where I grew from a fledgling medical writer to a subject matter expert.

8. Take a (career) break when needed

This may sound counterintuitive, but there are situations wherein taking a break may actually be good for your career. When my family was young, I found the work-life balancing act quite exhausting. So I went for imbalance by design and worked freelance/part-time to focus on things that mattered the most at that time.^{5,6} Years later, the scales were intentionally tipped to favour the career side. I could focus more on work, develop my skillset, and build up a career. Had I not stepped back from work at the right moment, I believe I would have burned out.

9. Manage with a heart, not with elbows

Never having gone through any formal management course, I was initially doubtful at how I

would be at managing people or projects.

I never read the book *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office*.⁷ It's supposed to be a good read. But the title implies that in order to advance in your career, you have to elbow your way up and step on people's toes. I disagree. I learned that you don't need an MBA or a PMP after your name to be a good manager. What you need is good old common sense and human decency. Treat your direct reports the way you want your line manager to treat you. You don't need to forget your scruples to succeed.

10. Make mistakes, learn, unlearn, relearn, and forgive (yourself)

We are allowed to make mistakes. That's how we learn. Use each mistake for all it's worth – squeeze all the lessons you can get out of it. Traditionally, writers are the bastions of literacy. But as the futurist Alvin Toffler once stated “The illiterate of the 21st century

will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”

So this VUCA world also needs us literary professionals not only to learn, but also unlearn and relearn.

Finally, also learn to forgive yourself. If you don't stop beating up yourself for each mistake, you'll never move on – or up.

The next adventure

When I started drafting this article, I didn't realise that the next opportunity was just around the corner. When this article gets published, I will have moved on to my next career adventure. I will have transitioned from a CRO to a big pharma, where I will be leading a small medical writing team in a therapeutic area I strongly believe in. At the time of writing, I am looking forward to the new challenges and exciting possibilities ahead. And my survival guide will surely come in handy.

Yes, it is a VUCA healthcare world out there. But it is also an industry of opportunities where one can be happy, grow, and thrive.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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